DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 249 631 EA 017 197

AUTHOR Duke, Daniel L.
TITLE Decision Making in an Era of Fiscal Instability. Fastback 212.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, Ind.
REPORT NO ISBN-0-87367-212-7
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 42p.; Publication of this fastback was sponsored by the Southern Connecticut State University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa.
AVAILABLE FROM Publications Sales, Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Eighth Street & Union Avenue, Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402 ($.75).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Boards of Education; *Budgeting; Costs; *Decision Making; Declining Enrollment; Dismissal (Personnel); Educational Facilities Planning; *Educational Finance; *Educational Planning; Efficiency; Elementary Secondary Education; Expenditures; Financial Problems; Leaves of Absence; Property Taxes; *Reduction in Force; *Retrenchment; Teacher Morale; Teacher Retirement; Textbooks
IDENTIFIERS Michigan; Oregon

ABSTRACT

How schools weather budget reductions shows the difference between effective and less effective school systems. Policymakers' response to reductions depends on an array of factors: general economic conditions, access to data about future trends, community expectations and "myths," past records of school effectiveness, local education leadership, and previous levels of local funding. Since so many options are available, retrenchment decision-making is likely to be highly politicized. How decisions are made can be as crucial as the decisions themselves. A scheme for decision-making is described that includes six areas: (1) how decisions will be made; (2) general reactions to retrenchment; (3) retrenchment goals, policies, and decision rules; (4) general strategies for reducing expenditures; (5) specific strategies for effecting program and personnel cuts; and (6) ways to stage retrenchment. When schools face declining resources, their effectiveness depends on the ability of local policymakers to choose between options and anticipate the consequences of those chosen. (MD)

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Decision Making in an Era of Fiscal Instability

Daniel L. Duke

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

Decision Making in an Era of Fiscal Instability

by
Daniel L. Duke

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 84-61198
ISBN 0-87367-212-7
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Bloomington, Indiana

This fastback is sponsored by the Southern Connecticut State University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, which made a generous contribution toward publication costs.

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Introduction

Two major trends are apparent in American education today: increasing pressure for school improvement and the reduction of resources for public schools. Public demands for improving the schools have occurred at the same time that a growing body of research has identified specific correlates of effective schools. However, much of the data on which these research efforts have been based were collected during periods of economic growth or stability. The current climate of fiscal instability, manifested by declining enrollments, school closings, bond and budget defeats, tax limitation measures, curtailment of federal and state funding programs, and high annual rates of inflation, may require educators to reconsider the school effectiveness findings. It is one thing, for example, to prescribe increased academic learning time when class sizes average 20 students and quite another when reductions in force have raised classes to over 30 students and other cuts have curtailed learning materials. As a first step in reconsidering the matter of school effectiveness, I would like to analyze some of the options now facing local education policymakers — boards of education, superintendents, and building administrators.

It is characteristic in times of fiscal instability for policymakers to bemoan the loss of options. For example, in his first official address as Superintendent of Portland (Oregon) Public Schools, Matthew Prophet Jr. warned district employees: "If the tax base measure . . . is defeated, the district will be faced with a narrow set of options, none of which is attractive."

While it is unlikely that a reduction in resources ever results in increased options, it is unwarranted to believe that policymakers lack any alternatives when faced with the need to retrench. Fieldwork in Califor-

nia, New York, and Oregon over the past six years has convinced me that a sufficient range of options exists to provide a sound basis for studying between-school and between-district variations in responses to fiscal instability. Thus, one superintendent decides to effect savings by eliminating junior high athletics and elementary school aides, while another elects to reduce the allocations for professional development and custodial assistance.

The work of March and Simon (1958) and March and Olsen (1976), among others, indicates that the nature of organizational decision making may be closely related to aspects of effectiveness. Current theory further suggests that the likelihood of making an appropriate decision is maximized when policymakers consider as many alternatives as possible. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that when schools and school systems thoroughly examine different responses to fiscal instability, they are more likely to minimize the negative consequences of retrenchment.

The basic premise of this fastback is that different responses to fiscal instability may result in different levels of school effectiveness. By studying the retrenchment decisions currently being made across the United States, it may be possible in the future to assess their impact on student outcomes. With this possibility in mind, I shall attempt to identify and describe the range of options available to local policymakers and speculate on some of the possible consequences of particular options.

The Range of Options When Facing Financial Instability

There have been several recent attempts to delineate the options facing decision makers when resources decline. For example, Whetten (1980) postulates four possible types of reactions: Generating, Preventing, Defending, and Responding.

Generating reactions are those that redefine a problematic situation in terms of opportunities. For example, obtaining new revenues from the rental of school facilities forced to close because of declining enrollments is a generating reaction. Preventing reactions are those that attempt to stop a change (such as budget cuts) from occurring in the first place. The efforts of California educators to defeat Proposition 13 can be considered to be a preventing reaction. Defending reactions are characterized by efforts to justify continued fiscal supports through the sharing of data on organizational effectiveness and employee diligence. Responding reactions encompass decisions based on the acceptance of diminished resources. Efforts are made to alter organizational goals and to adjust to a reduced level of support.

Whetten's classification system was used to guide data collection on the reactions to Proposition 13 by ten school districts in the San Francisco area (Duke, Hallinger, Kuntz, and Robinson 1981). The utility of the scheme was found to be limited due to the overlapping nature of the categories and their lack of specificity.

Crespo and Haché (1982) provide another classification system based on a study of retrenchment in Quebec schools. These two researchers collected empirical data on how internal organizational processes were redefined in response to a reduction of financial resources. They identified two basic strategies, which they call compensatory and management. Compensatory strategies are those designed to raise additional

revenues to offset the loss of resources (in the Quebec schools, the loss resulted from declining enrollment and provincial economic problems). The four compensatory strategy options were: student recruitment (retaining students by reducing dropout rate), financial (spending budget surplus and writing special grants), material (rental of unutilized space and buildings), and pedagogical (offering options in secondary training programs not found in the private sector).

Management strategies were more numerous than compensatory strategies and were aimed at enabling school districts to live within their reduced budgets. The management strategies fell into four areas: 1) reduction of services and materials, 2) organizational changes, 3) pedagogical adjustments, and 4) reduction of personnel.

While useful, the work of Crespo and Haché fails to delineate the full range of options to be considered. Little is said about general policies or procedures that might guide management strategies or about tactics in public relations that might be used. Neither of the schemes of Whetten or Crespo and Haché captures the complexity of actual decision making during periods of fiscal instability.

Building on their work and on my own empirical studies (Duke and Cohen 1983; Duke, Cohen, and Herman 1981; Duke, Hallinger, Kuntz, and Robinson 1981; Duke and Meckel 1980; Duke, Showers, and Imber 1981), I wish to propose a scheme for decision making for local policymakers facing fiscal instability. It includes the following decision areas:

1. How decisions will be made
2. General reactions to retrenchment
3. Retrenchment goals, policies, and decision rules
4. General strategies for reducing expenditures
5. Specific strategies for effecting program and personnel cuts
6. Ways to "stage" retrenchment

This scheme suggests that decision making during periods of fiscal instability is more than simply a matter of determining what to cut. Given the highly politicized nature of local school systems, how decisions are made can be as crucial as the decisions themselves. Like a theatrical event, the process of dealing with diminished resources must be "staged." Skills of ritual and rhetoric are called into play. Once a

general course of action has been decided, specific goals have to be selected to guide budget cutting. Strategies for reducing expenditures and moderating possible negative consequences of program and personnel reductions must be considered. The entire process may take many months and involve large numbers of people, both professionals and the public.

The six decision areas identified above are not intended to represent a complete inventory of all possibilities, nor are they presented in an invariant sequence. Two or more decision areas may overlap in actual practice, or a particular one may be omitted from consideration. Different school systems address decision making during periods of fiscal instability with differing degrees of thoroughness and coordination. Some anticipate retrenchment years before it occurs, while others wait to make decisions until a crisis is upon them. If the following discussion of the six decision areas succeeds in conveying a sense of the range of options facing decision makers and the complexity of the decision making process, the scheme will have served its purpose.

How Will Decisions Be Made?

Over the past decade many districts facing fiscal instability did not have a specially designed process for making retrenchment decisions. Such processes had to be developed and modified on the spot because of the pressure of actual events. Typically, the first consideration of local policymakers is to determine to what extent decision making will be centralized or decentralized.

The argument for centralized decision making is that diminished resources reduce the choices open to employees. Private industry, in particular, has been characterized by greater centralization during periods of fiscal instability (Greenhalgh 1980, p. 32). Furthermore, when scarce resources might lead to the elimination of organization units and administrative positions, some would say that centralization is an *inevitable* consequence of retrenchment. On the other hand, proponents of decentralization maintain that the likelihood that a community or a group of employees will accept reductions is increased by shared decision making. People are more likely to support a decision if they have participated in making it.

Another consideration facing a superintendent and board of education is to what extent decision making will occur at the building level. Recent literature has speculated that there is a relationship between school-based decision making and school effectiveness (David 1982). However, a study of school decision making in five secondary schools in California after the passage of Proposition 13 suggests that involving teachers may not always be easy (Duke, Showers, and Imber 1980).

Year-long case studies of decision making in those five schools revealed that teachers were not particularly eager to participate in shared decision making. While most acknowledged their theoretical

support for the idea of shared decision making, they also indicated that, in reality, being involved in the process rarely resulted in actual influence over the decisions that were eventually made. Some noted that the only time administrators were willing to share authority was when the nature of the decisions to be made was unpleasant — such as determining which personnel or programs had to be cut. Thus the commitment of policymakers to involving teachers in making retrenchment decisions may not necessarily be sufficient to justify decentralization.

In Portland, Oregon, the central administration attempted to decentralize part of the retrenchment decision-making process by involving citizens (Doherty and Fenwick 1982). In 1980 then Superintendent James Fenwick became aware of an anticipated revenue shortfall for the following year. To pave the way for a tax measure designed to generate additional revenue, a comprehensive and rational planning model was developed. The model was based on six tenets:

1. Budget reductions should be based on principles that make clear the reasons for all final decisions by the board of education.
2. Multiple opportunities should be provided for citizens to express their views regarding budget priorities at the local school level as well as at the district level.
3. Budget reductions that have districtwide effects should be recommended at the superintendent's level.
4. Principals and department heads should recommend specific budget reductions in programs and services within their respective operations, tempered by districtwide considerations.
5. Ultimately, a full range of options for budget reductions should be administratively determined using citizen input tempered by professional judgments.
6. The board of education should have available multiple options and related impact statements in making final decisions regarding specific budget reductions.

To obtain citizen input on reduction options, the administration used the existing mechanism of citizen budget advisory committees. Every school and department had such a committee — representing the in-

volvement of about 700 citizens. Each committee was asked to address two basic questions:

> How can we allocate resources within the "hold the line" budget in order best to help all students improve their achievement levels?
>
> If the district faces a severe budget shortage, what programs and services can we reduce or eliminate and still keep faith as far as possible with our commitment to improve student achievement?

Committees reviewed the recommendations made by principals and department heads to achieve 7.5% and 15% reductions in the budget for 1980-81. They also reviewed recommendations by department heads for 10% and 20% reductions during 1981-82. The reduction percentages were determined by the administration.

While the Portland process was carefully planned, it was not without critics. Building administrators, in particular, felt that their authority had been diminished as a result of central office insistence on citizen involvement. The likelihood of selecting a process that pleases everyone and still remains cost effective and expeditious seems rather small.

In most of the cases I surveyed, retrenchment decision making was conceived to be a multistaged process. The process often would begin when the superintendent and board of education agreed on steps to be followed in reaching retrenchment decisions. The process typically culminated with a vote by the board of education on a list of recommended budget reductions and related procedures that had been submitted by the superintendent. Between these two "bookends" a variety of activities occurred, depending on local politics, the openness of the board to input from teachers and citizens, the capacity of the central office to process information and resolve disputes, the time available for making decisions before money ran out, the current level of performance of the school system, and other situational factors.

The kind of process used for reaching retrenchment decisions ultimately may influence a number of factors related to school effectiveness. As previously suggested, the support of school employees and community members may depend on decentralization of authority. However, decentralization has the potential for negative by-products.

Serious conflicts over priorities can arise when interest groups are brought together to plan reductions. The "buffers" that exist when planning is contained within the central office no longer function in the open arenas of shared decision making. The quality of the decisions themselves and the success of their implementation also may be affected. Walker and Chaiken (1981, p. 23) suggest that organizations characterized by shared decision making and the free exchange of ideas may be well suited to the generation of creative decisions, but they are probably less able actually to implement those decisions than more structured centralized organizations. Some combination of shared decision making and central leadership could prove to be the most appropriate format for school systems facing fiscal problems.

One further word of caution seems justified. Sophisticated planning processes involving multiple stages and a variety of interest groups may create the illusion of rationality, but the enterprise often hinges on an assortment of idiosyncratic factors. My findings in the California study of low teacher interest in shared decision making support this notion (Duke, Showers, and Imber 1980). Teachers and citizens can be invited to contribute to retrenchment decision making, but the extent and quality of their participation may depend on how they were selected and by whom, the climate established in meetings, how their ideas were recorded and synthesized, and their own self-interest. Thus individuals who are personally threatened by budget cuts may be unable to appreciate the interests of an entire school system.

General Reactions to Retrenchment

Periods of fiscal instability provide natural laboratories for the study of societal priorities. Asking individuals to indicate their preferences during periods of economic growth often turns out to be a meaningless exercise because resources are sufficient to satisfy most needs. Only when resources grow scarce do people force themselves to think seriously about what is essential and what is not.

Before selecting a general reaction to anticipated reductions in resources, education policymakers may attempt to determine the relative importance of public schooling to voters. With the steadily increasing proportion of senior citizens, the growing number of adults opting not to have children, and the movement of many students from public to private schools, a case can be made that broad support for public schooling can no longer be assumed. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that policymakers had but a single choice in the face of retrenchment, that is, to passively accept fewer resources. Capable leadership can sometimes change public priorities by pointing out the long-term impact of budget cuts and invoking cherished societal values.

Whetten (1980), as previously noted, identifies four possible reactions to anticipated reductions in resources. Besides accepting the reductions, policymakers may opt to regard the reductions as opportunities for positive change (generating), uphold the job currently being done (defending), or resist efforts to effect reductions (preventing). The reaction or combination of reactions selected in particular circumstances will depend on such factors as local leadership, the potential for coalition building, and the magnitude of proposed reductions (Crespo and Haché 1982).

A case study of California schools from 1978 to 1980 is illustrative (Duke, Hallinger, Kuntz, and Robinson 1981). In June 1978 Califor-

nians approved Proposition 13, an amendment to the state constitution that restricted the ability of school districts and other municipal agencies to generate revenue from local property taxes. Resulting revenue losses meant that many districts had to curtail operating budgets approximately 10% in 1979 and again in 1980 (Duke and Meckel 1980; Katz and Weiner 1979). Efforts to defend the job schools were doing and to prevent the passage of Proposition 13 were spotty, poorly coordinated, and ultimately unsuccessful. Generating reactions were rare (Duke, Hallinger, Kuntz, and Robinson 1981). Generally, district officials accepted the loss of revenue and went about the painful process of cutting programs and personnel.

Two years later when some of the proponents of Proposition 13 attempted to pass a second initiative, Proposition 9 — this one designed to limit the state's ability to "bail out" hardpressed school systems and other local services — they were defeated by about the same margin by which they had won in 1978. What had changed in those two years?

The most obvious change was the total commitment of school systems throughout California to the prevention of Proposition 9. Rather than equivocating, feigning helplessness, or acting self-assured, education policymakers began building coalitions (actually the process commenced even before the petition drive for Proposition 9). The No on 9 Committee targeted its campaign on senior citizens and renters — two groups that had been promised relief by Proposition 13 proponents. These two groups discovered that the aftermath of Proposition 13 brought fewer services and higher rents.

The California experience, along with experiences in Michigan, demonstrates that education policymakers frequently can prevent efforts aimed at reducing funding. But what are alternative ways to deal with fiscal instability when resources actually have been frozen or reduced? What are some of the ways in which retrenchment actually may present an opportunity?

Problems as Opportunities

The ability to convert adversity into an opportunity may well be one of the most critical skills of leadership. Statesmen who have used aggression against their nations as opportunities to unite fragmented societies

are a case in point. One reason why problematic circumstances sometimes breed creative responses is that people have less to lose when resources become scarce. They are more willing to reconsider beliefs that they traditionally have taken for granted. The prospect of change ceases to be so threatening. Franklin Roosevelt was able to capitalize on this increased willingness to experiment during the Depression and subsequently fostered a variety of imaginative social services.

There are at least six ways in which the present climate of fiscal instability may give rise to benefits: improved instruction, greater quality control, better coordination of youth services, more shared responsibility, reduced stress, and greater professional commitment. All but the last two may be regarded as decision options by policymakers. Stress reduction and increased commitment can be serendipitous by-products that can alter the context within which retrenchment decision making takes place.

When educational resources are abundant, the solutions to problems tend to take the form of increased personnel. As a result, little pressure exists to refine instructional technology or develop more efficient ways to utilize the time of educators. Currently, however, personnel losses have been so great that changes in instructional methods are almost essential. Serious efforts are being made to adopt and implement the findings of teacher effectiveness studies. Microcomputers are being put to greater use for routine learning operations. It is entirely possible that the present fiscal crisis could spawn efforts to reconceptualize totally the job of teaching — something that previously has not been attempted in the United States (Duke 1984).

The content of instruction, as well as instructional methods, may benefit from reduced resources. Educators typically have felt the need to add to the curriculum rather than winnow it. In doing so, they have created the expectation that school is the appropriate locus for all learning. Such an expectation is simply unrealistic. Efforts are underway in many school systems to eliminate irrelevant, nonessential, and outdated curriculum content (Ylvisaker and Luchsinger 1982). Quality control mechanisms are being set up to monitor future curriculum accretion. Policymakers are establishing educational priorities that should lead to a more productive concentration of their energies and resources. It is

unlikely that the back-to-basics movement could have exerted so pervasive an influence over such a short period of time had not the pressures of retrenchment forced educators to re-evaluate curriculum priorities.

As educators begin to think more intensely about what schools should and should not do, they are beginning to devote more attention to building links with other sectors of society such as private industry, youth services, and churches. Efforts to coordinate the education of youth can eliminate duplication of services, prevent agencies from working at cross-purposes, and perhaps foster what rarely exists in the United States — comprehensive local, state, and national youth policies. Portland, Oregon, recently became one of the first metropolitan areas to develop such a youth policy.

Reduced resources for schooling have led to a thinning of the administrative ranks in many school systems. Thus an opportunity exists to share responsibility for running schools on a wider basis. Teachers, students, and parents all have potential leadership roles to play in schools, roles that could lead to a greater sense of "ownership" and ultimately to improved school effectiveness. For example, teachers can take charge of staff development and their own professional growth. Students may be involved more actively in controlling classroom management, vandalism, and litter. In several California school districts, students became involved in discouraging vandalism and reporting damaged property. The student government organization was offered a percentage of the money for repairs that was saved as a result of their efforts.

Until recently, U.S. society has been characterized by the continuous growth of options and the simultaneous erosion of norms and values that traditionally helped people make choices. While a variety of options exist during periods of retrenchment, the fact remains that the number of options is less than would be found under conditions of growth. However, fewer options may result in lower levels of stress (Flach 1977). Psychologists report that stress and anxiety often increase when individuals are faced with a multitude of choices. It thus may be no coincidence that cases of stress steadily rose during the Sixties and early Seventies.

The dilemma of too many options clearly can be seen in the experiences of many talented teachers who could not commit themselves wholeheartedly to teaching as a career, knowing that other occupational alternatives existed. However, the current economy has severely reduced the availability of jobs. Consequently, many teachers are making a more serious commitment to teaching. Energy previously devoted to considering nonteaching careers can be rechanneled into pedagogical concerns. Increased professional commitment is likely to be related to productivity and job satisfaction.

Education policymakers also may discover new ways to generate extra income. The rental of unused facilities already has been mentioned. Crespo and Haché (1982) indicate that schools in Quebec began to search for new students in an effort to increase revenues. Nonpublic schools were popular targets for recruitment efforts. In a study of New York City high schools, Duke, Cohen, and Herman (1981) found some public school officials openly competing for students. This process is not always desirable because certain kinds of students seem to be more actively recruited than others. While in theory public schools cannot limit access to students, in practice administrators often find ways to accomplish this end. In the case of New York City, the most sought after students tended to be white, bright, or handicapped. The latter were attractive because they were funded at a higher rate.

What Criteria Will Guide Decision Making?

Faced with reduced resources and the need to effect savings, policymakers do not always find creative opportunities for new options. Difficult decisions must be made, which sometimes leads to conflict. The potential for conflict can be lessened by establishing and publicizing clear goals, policies, and decision rules to guide the retrenchment process.

In a recent study of six Michigan school districts, Bidwell (1982) found that spending patterns centered on three district goals:

1. Compensatory or equity-seeking: meaning that more resources are devoted to disadvantaged and low-achieving students
2. Enrollment-based: meaning that the same amount of general-fund revenue is spent on each pupil, regardless of educational needs
3. Efficiency-seeking: meaning that the district reverses the compensatory model and devotes more money per pupil to schools with high mean scores on achievement tests

The criteria for guiding retrenchment decision making may be framed in other ways. For example, some Oregon school districts have stressed either excellence or diversity. A goal of maintaining excellence dictates priority status for traditionally strong, academic-type programs. A goal of diversity, on the other hand, calls for an array of programs appealing to all possible interests: artistic-creative, vocational, athletic, and so on. One affluent Oregon district, in trying to resolve the issue, decided that parents could afford to "purchase" diversity outside the schools through private lessons and clubs. Its policymakers opted to preserve excellence whenever possible, even if it meant cutting popular programs.

Another consideration for retrenchment decision making is whether reductions can be distributed over as long a period of time as possible. Districts try to "buy time," anticipating that attrition among senior employees and the prospects of alternative sources of revenue will minimize the negative effects of retrenchment.

A comprehensive set of criteria to guide budget reductions is used by the Beaverton (Oregon) School District. Each administrative unit in the district was asked to rank proposed budget reductions on the following criteria:

1. Required by law or policy
2. Basic or essential to a minimal operation of the district educational program
3. Self-supporting in terms of special revenues or cost savings
4. Highly productive in relation to cost
5. High level of investment in terms of capital outlay or training
6. A large number of people directly served or affected
7. Acceptability by community and staff

Some appreciation for the complexity of program review and budget planning in Beaverton (and elsewhere, no doubt) can be gained by realizing that policymakers have to consider at least seven sources of guidelines as they go through the ranking process: 1) district long-range plan, 2) district board policies and administrative regulations, 3) state and federal statutes, 4) community survey results, 5) state minimum standards, 6) accreditation standards, and 7) previous program reviews.

Understanding the factors that shape retrenchment decision making requires more than just an awareness of goal statements, lists of criteria, and specified guidelines. Timing may be of critical importance. Particular goals or criteria may receive emphasis, depending on whether or not an election or contract bargaining is scheduled in the near future. Little is known of the stability over time of goals within the same district. While retrenchment decision making often is viewed as a systematic, rational activity, in reality the process is highly political and may unfold in a haphazard way. For example, despite guidelines to the contrary, a district may cut a program of proven worth because it lacks a large or sufficiently powerful constituency. Recent federal reductions

in Chapter I assistance suggest that the willingness to remove support from effective programs is not limited to local districts.

Retrenchment often provides a convenient excuse to unload politically unpopular programs or to push for programs that appeal to policymakers. Desegregation efforts are illustrative. Some districts, when faced with budget deficits, back off from integration plans, claiming that transportation costs are too high. However, other districts find that integration and savings can be achieved simultaneously. School closings and program consolidation are used as mechanisms for creating magnet schools and special programs that attract students from a wide area.

The rhetoric of retrenchment frequently serves to confound the decision-making process. Goals sometimes are communicated to the public in the form of ambiguous slogans such as "cut most where it hurts least" or "keep cuts away from the classroom." In reality, it is deceptive to imply that budget cuts do not affect instruction. Case studies of retrenchment in New York City and San Jose (Duke, Cohen, and Herman 1981; Duke and Meckel 1980) indicate that reductions in support services, equipment, materials, building maintenance, and extracurricular activities affect teacher and student performance and morale.

While some policymakers opt for public relations strategies to show that reductions in instructional services have been minimized, others tend to threaten cutting "where it hurts most." The rationale is that threats to popular programs serving large numbers of students will produce a groundswell of public support for greater funds. The public is not always persuaded by this ploy. Schools in Estacada, Oregon, for example, were temporarily closed in 1982 when voters disagreed with school officials' proposed reductions. Residents felt that cuts in administrative staff, not instructional services, were needed.

Cutting Programs and Personnel

The analysis of options thus far has focused on the preparatory phases of retrenchment decision making: selecting a decision-making process, deciding whether to resist efforts to reduce funding, and determining overall goals and criteria to guide reductions. Now it is necessary to consider optional strategies for actually reducing expenditures. At least four general strategies can be identified: greater efficiency and economies of scale, personnel adjustments, across-the-board reductions, and selective reductions.

Efficiency and Economy

Reducing expenditures by utilizing resources more efficiently is the least painful method for coping with fiscal instability. In general, programs are left intact and few jobs are sacrificed. Energy savings are a popular target for efficiency drives, particularly because increased costs for gasoline, oil, and other fuels are a major contributor to inflation. Many school systems have created guidelines for thermostat settings and have installed more efficient heating systems. In colder regions of the country, some school systems have experimented with alterations in the school calendar that allow buildings to be shut down during the coldest periods of the year.

Other areas where greater efficiency has been sought include transportation, substitutes, insurance, and textbooks. In school systems where multiple bus runs result in partially filled buses, opening and closing times for elementary and secondary schools have been adjusted to permit maximum utilization of vehicles. To lower the expense of providing substitute teachers, regular teachers have been offered special in-

centives to remain "healthy"; and school nurses have been deployed to make "house calls" in order to curtail the abuse of sick leave. Because health insurance costs have been steadily rising, some districts now offer employees a self-insurance option. Basically, self-insurance plans provide employees with an annual lump sum of money instead of health insurance coverage. Presumably individuals are encouraged to stay fit, since they get to use their self-insurance money for whatever purpose they wish.

Because textbooks are a substantial expense, efforts have been made to eliminate multiple classroom sets of books. Many large districts have negotiated with large publishers to obtain wholesale prices on books.

Economies of scale represent a special type of efficiency strategy. Among the variety of ways to achieve economies of scale are school consolidation, subcontracting, and regionalization.

School consolidation is one of the more controversial strategies for effecting savings and often generates bitterness in neighborhoods where schools have to be closed. To ameliorate the situation, some districts plan closures years in advance, while others choose to create an entirely new school in an old building rather than absorb one school into another. The statistics on savings employed by school officials to justify closures typically are based on reductions in transportation, energy, and support personnel. However, parents argue that "big" is not always better where learning is concerned. One of the truisms shared by policymakers is that taxpayers with children want to effect savings in every school but their own.

Portland, Oregon, public school officials are learning that school closure may ultimately be more costly than keeping a high school with relatively low enrollment open. In a recent case, parents in a well-to-do neighborhood moved to secede from the district and create a new administrative unit unless their high school was re-opened. Oregon's attorney general indicated that the group had the right to secede. The potential loss of students and taxable assessed valuation outweighed the savings that might be realized by closing the high school. Legal expenses were substantial.

Subcontracting certain services to private firms or other public agencies is sometimes used to effect savings. For example, transportation,

driver training, and music instruction are handled by subcontracts in some school districts. School officials claim they save money on salaries, fringe benefits, and administrative costs. In areas with regional service centers and intermediate agencies, certain specialized educational services can be provided more economically by sending students to a central location for part or all of the day. Some vocational education and handicapped programs are handled in this way. In addition, administrative support services such as computer programming, test scoring, and payroll have been shifted to regional agencies in many states.

The drive for efficiency sometimes is used to achieve noneconomic goals as well. As previously indicated, school consolidation has been employed in some cities as a mechanism for achieving desegregation. For example, when funds for extracurricular activities were reduced in Richmond, Virginia, athletic teams from high schools were paired so that two schools sponsored a single set of teams. School pairings were designed to bring together predominantly white schools with predominantly black schools.

Efforts to achieve greater efficiency are not without negative consequences. The case of school closures already has been cited. Regionalization may be resisted by school officials who fear the erosion of their local authority. Uniform textbook adoption policies may produce savings, but teachers resent the loss of individual choice and curricular flexibility. In any event, savings resulting from the more efficient use of existing resources generally are insufficient and effect only marginal reductions in school budgets.

Personnel Adjustments

Since personnel costs account for at least three-quarters of most district budgets, it is this area that is likely to receive the most attention when retrenchment decisions must be made. Before employees actually have to be fired, policymakers have several options to consider. These include natural attrition, early retirement incentives, extended leaves of absence, salary renegotiation, and role redefinition.

The least painful method for effecting reductions in force is natural attrition — allowing retirements and normal turnover to occur

without replacing employees. In certain instances it may even be possible to replace retirees with volunteers (teacher aides, paraprofessionals) or interns (teachers, junior administrators). However, such arrangements generally must be regarded as temporary.

Where retirements are not occurring rapidly enough, incentives may be offered in the form of a lump sum of money. These single occasion outlays are offset by the savings that occur by leaving positions vacant or by filling them with less experienced (and therefore less costly) employees.

There are two problems with the natural attrition strategy. First, it requires time. The rate of employee turnover has slowed considerably as a result of changes in the laws governing the mandatory age for retirement and because of the unstable economy. If a school system's budget for the coming year is not approved by the taxpayers or the state announces a reduction in basic aid, there generally is insufficient time for a strategy based solely on attrition. Second, natural attrition may negatively affect certain program areas in an arbitrary manner. Unless employees who remain can be quickly retrained or there are contractual provisions for selective retention, personnel losses due to attrition can put certain programs in jeopardy. For example, if the teachers who retire in a given year are all foreign language teachers, this program will suffer more than other curriculum areas.

An alternative form of personnel adjustment is the extended leave of absence. Similar in purpose to early retirement incentives, it is designed to reduce the proportion of the personnel budget going to more experienced (and more costly) employees. During extended leaves, the district can hire less costly employees. In many cases employees on leave choose not to return, thus creating some flexibility in staffing. However, as with early retirement incentives, extended leaves of absence are unlikely to accommodate all the personnel reductions necessary when faced with a major budget deficit.

Another option to consider is renegotiating contracts. Several approaches have been used by school officials. The most extreme alternative is to reduce all salaries by a certain percentage. In many cases, unions have bargained for nonmonetary concessions in return for lower salaries. A less radical measure involves freezing salaries at current

levels. School systems also can effect salary reductions by requiring employees to take furloughs or by cutting back to a four-day work week. In 1982 Oregon's state superintendent of public instruction received requests from a number of small districts to initiate four-day weeks. One petitioner projected savings of 17% in the operating budget and one dollar in the tax rate. In 1982 Colorado had 24 rural schools on reduced weeks. Traditionally unions have resisted management efforts to reduce work weeks and salaries, but in recent years the issue has become whether to take salary cuts to save positions or to preserve salaries and lose colleagues.

Another retrenchment strategy entails redefining the job responsibilities of employees. It is sometimes used in conjunction with attrition and extended leaves of absence. For example, in rural parts of Oregon, when the principal of a small elementary school retires or takes a leave, the principal may be replaced with a head teacher or a supervising principal from a neighboring elementary school. Employees frequently are willing to assume additional responsibilities for less money than it would cost to hire another full-time person. In other cases, employees, particularly those who are financially secure or near retirement, may be eager to reduce their responsibilities, shifting from full-time to part-time status. Utilizing part-time teachers to cover highly specialized but low demand courses can mean the difference between offering such courses or eliminating them.

There is little research on the relative merits of particular personnel adjustment strategies. For example, it is not known whether increasing the job responsibilities of existing personnel as an alternative to hiring new employees adversely affects instructional effectiveness. In Oregon a number of school districts have been fined by the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission for delegating additional responsibilities to individuals who were not properly certificated. The commission feels that improperly certificated employees are less likely to deliver effective educational services.

The impact on staff morale and productivity of renegotiating salaries downward also remains unclear. Policymakers seem to prefer personnel adjustment strategies to the elimination of entire programs or to firing employees. Their preference may be based less on the proven merits of

personnel adjustments than on the political conflict and interpersonal tension that accompany other strategies, notably across-the-board or selective reductions.

Across-the-Board Reductions

In cases where budgets must be trimmed substantially over a short period of time, policymakers may be forced to choose between across-the-board cuts or selective cuts. Across-the-board cuts typically are regarded as the most expedient course of action, since time need not be expended deliberating where cuts should or should not occur. Every department and every school is directed to reduce its projected budget by a certain percentage. While across-the-board cuts seem equitable and reasonable on the surface, policymakers need to exercise caution. Different programs have different needs. There is no guarantee that comparable reductions will have comparable impacts.

Elsewhere I have argued that reductions in suburban school allocations are unlikely to have the negative impact of similar reductions in inner-city school allocations (Duke and Cohen 1983). At issue is the so-called "threshold effect." A certain threshold of achievement exists for students. They must cross this threshold in order to reap the benefits of their formal education. The threshold may be an eighth-grade reading level because the state proficiency tests are written at that level. Students must read at or above the eighth-grade level in order to pass the high school proficiency tests and qualify for a diploma.

If students in a suburban high school are reading well above the eighth-grade level and their school's budget is reduced by 10%, it is still likely that they will be able to earn a diploma. If, on the other hand, students in an inner-city school are barely reading at an eighth-grade level and their school's budget is cut 10%, their chances of earning a diploma may be seriously jeopardized. Thus the consequences of losing a teacher at an inner-city school are likely to be more serious than at a suburban school.

A second problem with across-the-board cuts is the possibility of weakening truly strong programs while preserving lackluster or ineffectual programs. Although it has not been studied systematically, the ultimate result of a consistent policy of across-the-board cuts may be

across-the-board mediocrity. However, selective reductions are not without problems either. Difficulties arise in establishing appropriate criteria, comparing the worth of individual programs, and coping with employee and community tension. The insecurity, paranoia, and ill feelings generated during the process of selective reductions can last long after the process has ended.

Selective Reductions

Selective reductions typically entail curtailing or eliminating specific programs and cutting the number of employees in those programs. Two basic options are to reduce programs and let the reductions dictate personnel cuts, or to cut personnel — usually on the basis of seniority — and let the cuts dictate program reductions. In practice, a combination of the two strategies seems to characterize most retrenchment decision making. However, there are even some options to seniority. *Education Week* (28 April 1982, p. 6) reports that the Arlington (Virginia) School Board adopted a policy allowing principals considerable discretion in exempting certain teachers from districtwide layoffs. Principals are permitted to "protect" one teacher for every 19 on their faculty, whether or not that person has seniority.

In order to determine where to reduce expenditures, school officials usually engage in one of two exercises. The first is subtractive; that is, a figure for the pared budget is agreed on and cuts in programs are proposed until the figure is reached. The second is additive, a process using zero-based budgeting (Bumstead 1981). Zero-based budgeting requires officials faced with a deficit to reconstruct the budget from scratch, working up to the revised budget total. This approach tends to generate more creative responses to retrenchment than the subtractive process. School officials suggest that thinking first about which programs should be preserved yields results quite different from simply casting about for programs to cut.

To date there have been few comparative studies of specific school district responses to budget reductions. Those that have been done indicate a wide range of responses (Crespo and Haché 1982). In a study of 10 California school districts in the aftermath of Proposition 13, my col-

leagues and I found the following (Duke, Hallinger, Kuntz, and Robinson 1981):

1. Teaching positions were eliminated in 9 out of 10 districts, but the pattern was different in each case. For example, remedial teachers were cut in two districts, industrial arts in three, art and music in two, foreign language in three, advanced courses in two, and so on.

2. Personnel reductions varied considerably. Four districts eliminated administrative positions at the building level; four districts reduced central office administrative positions; and eight districts cut classified personnel. Counselors were released in four districts, one of which eliminated all counselors and had teachers assume guidance responsibilities. Seven districts reduced teacher aides, while two curtailed substitute teachers.

3. Among the program victims were summer school (7), adult education (30), athletics (1), other extracurricular activities (2), and day care (1).

4. Three districts reduced the number of periods in the high school day.

5. Seven districts curtailed transportation services, which affected both curricular (field trips) and extracurricular programs (travel to games, after school practices).

Despite the number of constraints imposed on district decision making by state and other regulations (mandated student/teacher ratios and teacher/administrator ratios, teacher certification requirements, building safety specifications, and curriculum standards), sufficient variety exists in selective reductions among different school systems to warrant studies of their impact on school effectiveness. At the same time, certain commonalities can be observed in the ways school systems respond to reduced resources. If fiscal instability continues, these common responses could have major consequences for public education in general.

Special education programs, the hallmark of improved services in the last two decades, may be doomed. For one thing, they are easy targets for budget cutting. Their discrete identity, frequent reliance on outside funds, and separate staff place them in vulnerable positions when compared to core programs. Special programs also have been blamed for the

escalation of school budgets during an era of declining enrollments (Bumstead 1981). Eliminating special education programs raises questions about educational equity. By forcing policymakers to weigh the relative merits of programs for handicapped, gifted, potential dropouts, actual dropouts, remedial readers, and other groups, retrenchment decisions boil down to which youngsters are more deserving of an education. That schooling has come to be regarded as a zero-sum game, where one group benefits at the expense of another, seems inconsistent with this nation's egalitarian doctrines.

Another consequence of program cutting may be growth in the private sector. Driver education, music, art, and drama programs are examples of offerings already available outside public schools. A question that arises is whether children from poor families will have comparable access to out-of-school opportunities if they are available only in the private sector.

While school systems vary in the choice of which programs to reduce, the fact remains that program cuts mean personnel losses. Personnel losses generally mean larger average class sizes, which, in turn, portend less individual attention for students, more classroom management problems, and greater teacher dissatisfaction. I have characterized this cycle of reactions as a "downward spiral" process that, if allowed to continue, can eventually contribute to teacher recruitment problems and the exodus of able students (Duke and Cohen 1983; Duke and Meckel 1980). Part of this "downward spiral" process finds teachers adopting coping strategies, such as assigning less homework and written work, which in the long run leads to lower achievement (Duke, Cohen, and Herman 1981).

Studying which programs are reduced or eliminated during retrenchment affords an opportunity for researchers to determine whether the decline process is symmetrical, that is, whether school systems shrink in the reverse order in which they grow. Are the most recently added programs the first to be excised, even though they may be needed more than older programs? Ford (1979) and Freeman and Hannan (1975) find that school systems with declining enrollments lose proportionally more teachers than administrators, suggesting retrenchment may be asymmetrical. Perhaps administrative supervision is regarded by

policymakers as more crucial during periods of fiscal instability, when teacher morale may decline. An alternate explanation is that administrators simply are in a better position than teachers to protect their jobs.

An emerging trend related to program and subsequent personnel cuts is the reduction of differentiated staffing. Special programs gave rise to an assortment of new job titles — Chapter I Director, Community Relations Specialist, Learning Center Coordinator, Teacher on Special Assignment, Learning Disabilities Specialist, Staff Development Specialist, and the like. In an effort to minimize increases in class size, policymakers tend to eliminate these supporting roles before considering cuts in teaching staff. In doing so, they may remove a major incentive for talented teachers: the prospect of moving into a specialist or quasi-administrative position. On the other hand, reducing staff differentiation could conceivably lead to less role ambiguity and improved coordination.

The preceding analysis indicates that the choices facing education policymakers may not be as limited or as clear-cut as some would believe. An awareness of the variety of options and the likely consequences of particular options should assist policymakers in the process of retrenchment decision making. Also of importance is how the entire process is orchestrated and publicized. Here, too, policymakers are presented with choices.

Staging Retrenchment

How an event is staged often can have as much impact on its ultimate outcome as the event itself. Retrenchment decision making is no exception. It is a process replete with rhetoric, rituals, and posturing. Also, timing is a critical factor.

Policymakers tend to adopt one of two postures: "straight talk" or "positive thinking." Straight talk dictates a scenario based on honesty and realism. Preparations for the worst possible set of developments are made early. Acting on the assumption that constituents do not appreciate surprises, policymakers provide advance warnings of probable budget deficits and their likely impact on students and employees. Conscious efforts are made to identify and acknowledge people's anxieties. Certain legal obligations, in fact, reinforce the "straight talk" posture. For example, most states require notices of possible termination to be sent to employees months before action may actually be taken. When San Jose High School was faced with the loss of 14 teachers, several counselors, and most of its teaching assistants following Proposition 13, the principal chose a "straight talk" approach (Duke and Meckel 1980). Instead of pretending that employees who remained could simply work harder and accomplish the same objectives as before, he began to develop a list of those services that no longer could be provided to students. Among other losses, student absences could no longer be monitored closely, strangers could not be prevented from coming onto campus, and instruction in remedial reading could not be provided for any but the most serious cases. As a result of specifying exactly what services would be lost as a result of cuts, the principal generated enough community pressure on the board of education that it was compelled to reinstate some of the cancelled positions.

A variation on straight talk sometimes finds policymakers exaggerating the size of probable cuts and their anticipated impact. When actual reductions turn out to be less sizable than expected, the community is presumed to feel relieved. It is uncertain how often this posture can be employed before the credibility of school district prognosticators is diminished.

Positive thinking, on the other hand, is premised on the belief that too much straight talk begets self-fulfilling prophecies. Instead of dwelling on preparations for the worst scenario, policymakers communicate in an optimistic manner, stressing their faith in the community's support for its schools. Publicity regarding the accomplishments of the schools is a key element of this strategy. The risk with positive thinking is that constituents will not be psychologically prepared in the event that programs and personnel actually are reduced.

Some policymakers place their faith in sophisticated planning mechanisms. By anticipating fiscal instability far enough in advance and planning accordingly, they believe the need for posturing can be eliminated. Enrollment decline or increase is forecast, using demographic projections. Attrition is used to accommodate reductions in force. Reserve funds are set aside for emergencies.

Interestingly, playing the role of "the wise planner" sometimes can produce an unfavorable audience reaction. For example, in Oregon in 1982 several superintendents were fired when they revealed large surpluses at the close of the fiscal year. Constituents felt they had been over-taxed. Taxpayers tend to be suspicious when there are emergency reserve funds during periods of fiscal instability, even though these are times when such resources can be of greatest value.

There are other unintended negative consequences that may result from too much advance planning. When across-the-board cuts are made in state aid to education, for example, districts that initiated reductions in anticipation of retrenchment find themselves suffering more than their neighboring districts. In California, districts that attempted to effect savings prior to the passage of Proposition 13 found they had less slack to offset the impact of revenue losses than did other districts.

A more subtle negative consequence of advanced planning is the unfavorable publicity that may result from not "feeling the pinch." When

the economy is in trouble, it is conventional wisdom that everyone should share in the misery. School districts are no exception. One of the rituals of retrenchment is "observing thy neighbor." When taxpayers in one community hear of the reductions being made by schools in surrounding communities, they naturally tend to expect their own school system to make some sacrifices. During such occasions it may be difficult for local policymakers to convince their constituents that wise planning obviated the need for reductions.

The era of long-term planning in education may be coming to an end, not because such planning is unimportant but because of changing external conditions over which policymakers have no control. Population shifts, inflation, unemployment, and changing government regulations make it difficult to conduct reasonably accurate forecasting. Equations traditionally used in planning can only tolerate a limited number of "unknowns" before the results fail to justify the effort expended.

When faced with retrenchment, timing often spells the difference between success and failure. Policymakers need to sense when it is necessary to use straight talk and when they must use positive thinking. Because policymakers play to different audiences, their "productions" have to be altered, depending on whether they are addressing the needs of staff members who fear their jobs will be terminated or parents considering transferring children to private schools. As with all good actors, policymakers also need to "read" their audiences, identifying prevailing expectations and fears. If a budget is defeated, for instance, care must be taken not to return to the voters too quickly with a revision, lest they feel manipulated. Furthermore, the public seems to expect its policymakers to suffer along with everyone else during times of fiscal instability.

Conclusion

The current period of fiscal instability shows little sign of abatement. It is reasonable to assume that some school districts will weather the crisis better than others. I have argued that differences between more effective and less effective school systems derive, in part, from how retrenchment decisions are made. Despite a variety of constraints on retrenchment decision making, policymakers possess a sufficient variety of options to permit researchers to differentiate between their responses, thereby establishing a foundation for continuing research on school effectiveness. It is entirely possible that such demonstrated correlates of effectiveness as school climate, teacher morale, curriculum content, classroom management, academic learning time, and parental support will be directly affected by such decisions as whom to involve in retrenchment planning, what priorities should guide the process, which programs and personnel should be cut, and how the operation will be orchestrated.

How policymakers respond to fiscal instability will depend on an array of factors, including general economic conditions, access to data about future trends, community expectations and "myths," past records of school effectiveness, local education leadership, and previous levels of local funding. It is probable that more options will be available to suburban schools than to inner-city or rural schools. For this reason, a disturbing consequence of the current period of fiscal instability may be a widening of the gulf separating socioeconomic groups in the United States.

Because of the multiple options available, retrenchment decision making is likely to be a highly politicized process. Policymakers must

expect to participate in and be subject to coalition formation, lobbying, and conflict resolution activities. When school systems are faced with declining resources, their future effectiveness will ultimately depend on the ability of local policymakers to sift through various demands and anticipate the consequences of particular options. By using data from schools that have already experienced declining resources, policymakers gain insight into both the process and the consequences of retrenchment decision making. Such has been the purpose of this fastback.

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